DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 188 969 SO 012 660

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TITLE Some Reflections of a Female Seminarian: Woman, Whither Goest Thou?
PUB DATE 1 Sep 79
NOTE 8p.: Paper presented at the American Psychological Association Convention (New York, NY, September 1, 1979).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Beliefs: *Church Related Colleges: Dogmatism: Educational Needs: *Females: Higher Education: *Hostility: Negative Attitudes: Protestants: Resentment: Sex Bias: *Sex Discrimination: Student Characteristics: *Theological Education

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the attitudes and behavior of male students and teachers toward female seminary students. The purpose is to determine the extent to which female students are accepted as being equal to male seminary students. Data are based on experiences of female students in two Protestant seminaries--one in a cosmopolitan capital city and one in a small university town. Review of historical and current seminary enrollment figures reveals only a small minority of female students. For example, one seminary belonging to a traditional religion in which women are allowed to function as unordained but paid staff ministers has graduated thousands of male seminarians and only five female seminarians since 1950. Indications of bias against female seminarians include failure of professors to address female students, sexist reading material, narrow and sexist interpretations of Biblical precepts regarding women, attitudes among male seminarians that women should not be ministers, and failure of teachers and administrators to recommend qualified female seminary students for job interviews. Findings indicate that religious education has not kept pace with the secular world in providing necessary advances on behalf of women. The conclusion is that seminaries would improve their treatment of women if they offered equal opportunity for all graduates, employed non-sexist language, provided special counselors for women, and offered courses on the psychology of women. (DB)

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SOME REFLECTIONS OF A FEMALE SEMINARIAN: WOMAN, WHITHER GOEST THOU?

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Let me take you on a journey to two present-day Protestant seminaries in the God-fearing country that we proudly call the "land of the free and the home of the brave." The first seminary is situated in a cosmopolitan capital city. It is a seminary of a mainstream religion which has allowed its women to be ordained to the full pastoral ministry for the past 60 years. As we walk down the halls and into the classrooms, we note a predominance of male seminarians. Very few women here are part of the Master of Divinity program which is the entrance level generally accepted by most churches for pastors. Rather, these women are mostly getting degrees in religious education, pastoral counseling (as an adjunct to another counseling program), or a Master of Arts in some other area of religion. Within this traditional setting, we listen as a highly learned and respected Bible scholar and seminary professor is asked what will after all be the fate of the widow who, after having married seven brothers consecutively after each widowhood, in good levirate fashion, dies herself and goes to heaven. Unhesitatingly, the professor responds, "What do you mean, 'what will happen to her in heaven?' She will not be there, of course. Only virgin males will ever make it to heaven!" Then in a somewhat apologetic response to the shocked class of 12 male and one female seminary students, he says, "I'm sorry to say that no women will be in heaven, but I'm afraid that that is the way it is." He has also announced that any hope of salvation without Christ---referred to in the Bible as a "filthy rag"---really alludes to a disgusting bloody rag of a menstruating woman. The female seminarian focuses hard on not feeling personally filthy and worthless because she is a woman. Then he adds that Mary could never have been allowed to deliver baby Jesus in the inn because

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[1]This paper was presented at the American Psychological Association Convention in New York City on September 1, 1979.

she was pregnant and thus considered ritualistically unclean by the religious people of her time!

In another class in this same seminary, a professor equally as knowledgeable and esteemed, corrects a male seminarian who is questioning the right of women to talk in church or in school or even to teach men anything. The professor gently tells him to consider Paul's times and the many changes that the church in the modern world of today faces, needing to use all of its resources in its outreach of the priesthood of all believers comprising the church of God.

Now come with me to another seminary in a small village, a university town setting. The denomination is quite traditional but not mainstream religiously affiliated. This denomination does not yet permit full ordination of women into the gospel ministry. In some of its churches, women are allowed to function as unordained but paid staff ministers, doing pastoral counseling and visitation, giving Bible studies, and sometimes even preaching. Such work by women is granted on an extremely selective basis according to the decision of the particular churches within the denomination. Though this seminary has existed over 30 years and has graduated thousands of male seminarians, only five women have been graduated with the M. Div. degree. A few more women have completed Th.D. and M. A. programs, but these do not typically lead to the entrance levels of ministerial positions. Only three females are currently enrolled in the M. Div. program here. In one of the classes of this seminary, a well-known author in the field of religion and a seminary professor greets his students twice a day with a rousing, "Good morning, gentlemen!" This is despite the fact that in his two classes there is a female seminarian and his command of the English language is otherwise superb. When the lone woman looks questioningly at him as he goes through this travesty each day, he continues to correct himself reluctantly with, "...and lady!" Throughout the course, he tells the class about topics that they must

discuss with their wives. All of his glowing examples of good people from Biblical and early church times are men.

In a theology class, a professor says to a class of 25 men and 2 women that there are no women theologians, inferring that somehow theology is not a woman's cup of tea. In this same seminary, a woman had begun a Th.D. in theology and was made to feel so out of place that she changed her area of study to another field of religion. Another professor, known for encouraging women to come to seminary, says of the one female seminarian in his class, "Men, this is a rare opportunity for us: we have a woman in class. You know, they think differently than we do!" Still another professor speaks of the entire body of believers as "the good brethren" and refers to ministers in the masculine gender. In a theology class, he tells the 15 males and one female that "we all are seminally related through Adam." A male student who is also a practicing physician asks the professor what he means by this, on doctrinal-theological grounds. The professor explains, "I say that we are all seminally related through Adam because it is the males who carry all of the genes that we inherit." Not one male student, not even the physician who ordinarily questions all that the professor says, questioned the obvious ignorance of biology which the professor demonstrated. Still in shock, the female seminarian asks him how he can say that all genes come through the male. He blithely responds, "Oh, well, don't say I said it. Augustine and Tertullian were the ones who thought this." What he failed to explain was why he was propagating such fallacious information if he indeed recognized it as such. In his class, Adam but never Eve is extolled, Abraham but never Sarah, John the Baptist but never Mary Magdalene, and so on until it would seem that the world which God created was not of "God created he him; male and female created he them" but that the world was created of only males and more males, until men do come to believe that they created other beings seminally and alone or with other males.

In many other ways, the rules that antisexists have shown to be productive and workable are seriously violated in some seminary settings. Females in seminary read textbooks glaringly filled with sexist language, in which good, religious people are referred to in the masculine gender. Rarely do seminarians have female professors, and when they do, it is likely to be one woman (usually teaching a Biblical language, religious education, or church history) among a full male staff of 15-20 male professors. So much for role-modelling for the female seminarian. Thus female professors as well as female seminarians are made to feel out of place in seminaries.

What are male seminarians like on feminist issues when these hit close to home? Intellectually, they tend to be more open-minded on the average than male seminary professors. However, they tend to take Biblical precepts construed to support their nonacceptance of women in the ministry, that somehow women do not belong there. Black seminarians sometimes seem to be more accepting of women in ministry. As a doctoral-level psychologist with many years of clinical experience, I present a problem to my co-seminarians: a moment-of-truth with which to contend. A black seminarian friend, an open-minded former social worker, conducted an informal poll among other black seminarians to resolve for himself whether any real sexual bias against women existed in seminary. Both saddened and appalled by his findings, he discovered that none of those with whom he spoke even approved of the idea of women ministers. They expressed some sorrow---perhaps really guilt---about someone with advanced degrees being in the program and yet not being allowed to do much of anything within the ministry. Female seminarians are often asked by their male counterparts, "what are <u>you</u> going to do when you finish seminary?" Often these women would like to scream, "<u>I'm</u> going into the ministry. What are <u>you</u> going to do?" Intimidated about making excellent grades, the women often hear men inferring that it is a waste to give a female seminarian an A.

One female seminarian often is asked to type papers for the male seminarians. Refusing, she tells them that her editor-physician husband does all the typing in her family. Frequently the butt of uninvited remarks from seminarians whom she does not know, she is asked, "What are you doing in seminary? You belong at home." A seminarian wrote in her name as a candidate for Student Forum vice-president, as a joke and unknown to her. The Forum president let her name go through "just to test the climate of the seminary for such things now," adding, "she will never be allowed to get to vice-president because they know that that office leads to president, and they will never elect a woman president of seminary!"

In seminary chapel, a highly successful evangelist tells men that saying "I love you" to women could make women their slaves for life. A female seminarian advises him in private that no woman in this country really wants to be a slave to anyone anymore. In the classroom situation, he addresses the class of 20 men and 2 women as "brethren," "men," and "fellows." While he often defers to the Ph.D. psychologist in seminary, always addressing her as "Dr.____," he never uses "sister" to recognize her feminine presence in his class in evangelistic preaching. When she begs him in private to please desist in referring to her in the masculine gender all of the time, he agrees to mend his ways. For the next classes, however, he steps up his efforts to speak to the class as "brethren" and "gentlemen" exclusively. Puzzled, she seeks to speak to him quietly and privately again. He responds by creating a terrible scene in which half of the class returns to take his part in using masculine language. During the argument, he hurls a tirade at the "women's libbers," defends the sexist language of the English translation of the Bible, and declares for all to note that women were never really created equal to men but that men were meant to rule women. To him, "brethren" included men and women and "brother" was equal to "sister." She challenged him, saying that if this were the case, she would no longer call him "brother" or "Dr.____" but

"Sister____." He retorted that he would just laugh at her. However, within a matter of days, he had advanced to addressing the class as "Gentlemen and lady."

During evangelism field school, a female seminarian is the first of her sex in her denomination to go through this particular seminary course. In a special dedicatory service in church before the crusade begins, she listens unbelievingly as the local minister and then the evangelist refer throughout the service to the group of 11 male and one female seminarians as "the brethren" and "the fellows from seminary who are the evangelistic team." Sadly, she wonders if, in their minds, they have neutered her or if they have totally discounted her existence on the team altogether. One morning during the devotional, the male seminarian offering the object lesson reflects that the evangelistic team of 12 seminarians is like the 12 disciples of Christ. Then, turning to the lone female, he says, "Even you, you are like Judas: the different one!"

In seeking placement on a church staff, especially for purposes of sponsorship, the female seminarian finds it strange that in her one and one-half years at seminary she has not been interviewed for a position. She discovers, upon questioning the interview procedures, that the interviewers from the conferences always ask to see men and never even think of seeing women in seminary.

Perhaps such antifeminist experiences should not come as a shock in a setting where the very word "seminary" originally meant "seedbed, nursery" from the Latin <u>seminarium</u> for <u>semen</u>. If words mean what they claim, maybe this very orientation has made it so hard for women to travel in the male world where "seminary" and "seminar" mean that which is seminally related to semen! Make no mistake: the sexist attitudes often engendered and fostered in seminaries form the very bases for the prejudices which haunt women in many settings in life, not only in the church environment but at home and on the job as well as in social situations.

There seems to be some hope for women and men within the seminary setting, though, with speakers being sought to talk on feminism, on the counseling of women by ministers, and on the role of women in the church. These requests come from both seminary professors and male seminarians, although only from the most open-minded in either case. Antifeminists are becoming more disinclined to air their views against women, sensing the growing antisexist climate. How strange it is that the area of religion, in which the very crux is the preaching of love of other human beings, has so disinfranchised women and has threatened their mental health to such a great extent. This is especially sad in light of the advance of the non-religious world and its impact on bringing about many new and needed changes on behalf of womankind. Some seminaries sense that they are lagging far behind in this area and need to catch up. Non-sexist language must be employed and with regularity in such environments. Seminaries must be ever mindful to be sensitive to the awareness of females in seminary who sense that they are largely unaccepted by many male seminarians and professors. Further, seminaries need to acknowledge and deal effectively with the depression which emerges from a sense of hopelessness over the real lack of opportunity for women in the ministry: often woman who are even ordained to the ministry are pinned in figurehead positions where they are kept relatively impotent when compared to the powerful tasks assigned to their male counterparts.

Counselors and special consultants for women in seminaries need to be brought into the picture as soon as possible. A course, particularly a core course, should be offered in seminaries on the psychology of women. Such a course is sorely needed. If for no other reason than for the fact that, regardless of country, nationality, or religious affiliation, women have always been the backbone of church and synagogue, men in the ministry and rabbinate must learn more about dialoguing meaningfully with women and from a level of true equality. Indeed, because it definitely appears that the religious climate so sets the overall atmosphere for the dialogue between women and men, such interaction may be the only hope of a true healing reconciliation between the sexes, ending a long battle.